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ABSTRACT

Recent studies of the perceptions of teachers and supervisors about the benefits of teacher supervision show clear disagreement between the two groups. Supervisors see their efforts as helpful to teachers, whereas teachers consider supervision ineffectual. This document reports on research conducted to test the theory that positive teacher-supervisor relationships depend upon supervisors encouraging teachers to permit psychological "access" to themselves and their teacherhood. Interviews with teachers in New York state revealed 11 main categories of supervisory behavior that might encourage such access. A followup questionnaire further narrowed these categories and showed a strong correlation between behaviors leading to access and behaviors leading to productivity of supervision. Relative to access, important behaviors were: (1) being available, physically and personally; and (2) recognizing teacher expertise. Behaviors relative to productivity were: (1) giving immediate, non-punitive feedback; (2) active listening; and (3) presenting a collaborative, alternative-seeking approach to problem-solving. The implications of these findings, however, go beyond the specifics of supervisory behavior to a necessary reexamination of the basic structure of supervisor-teacher role relations, which, by its nature, perpetuates established and divisive expectations and negative behavior patterns among both teachers and supervisors. Six references are appended. (IW)

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THE CONCEPT OF ACCESS IN SUPERVISOR-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS[1]

by

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This study was designed to test out whether or not what we call the concept of access (to teachers by supervisors) was a viable one to consider in connection with problems of supervision in the schools.

The organizational structure of school systems implies a hierarchy of authority relative to the supervision of teachers, which provides for legitimated access to teachers by supervisors. For example, principals and other types of supervisors have the organizational prerogative, reinforced by their job descriptions, to intervene in the working lives of teachers in order to improve instruction. The model is a rational-technical one. It is based on the bureaucratic assumptions that (1) organizational superordinates have both the responsibility and the expertise to control and improve the work of their subordinates, and (2)

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organizational subordinates will accept the advice and direction offered because they acknowledge the legitimacy and rationality of the system, because of the organization's reward-punishment system, or what have you.

The history of research on supervision does not offer support for the idea that this rational-technical model works in any global fashion. In studies conducted some years ago, for example, Blumberg and Amidon (1965) reported that the bulk of teachers considered their supervision to be rather ineffectual. More recently, Pavan (1983) surveyed 19 studies that had been conducted using the clinical-supervision model, one that is highly rational-technical in its structure. Of the 19, one yielded significant results that suggested the efficacy of that model, a finding that might be expected by chance or close to it. Supervisors, incidentally, tend to see things quite oppositely from teachers. That is, they conceive their efforts to be quite beneficial to teachers (Blumberg, 1980).

How can these conditions be accounted for? Why do teachers, as a rule, describe their supervision to be only minimally helpful? Why does a model which, on the face of it, seems reasonable enough not appear to fulfill the expectations of its designers in any generalized kind of way? Speculations as to the answers to these questions certainly can vary. The one that led to this inquiry is based on the following assumptions:

1. Much as the operational structure of a school as an organization is an interpersonal one (Blumberg and Greenfield, 1980), so is the structure of classroom supervision. It involves, primarily, one person attempting to give help to

another and has as an underlying premise the assumption that the one to whom help is proffered will accept and use it.

2. The structure of this interpersonal process has organizational legitimacy. There is no question that a principal or other type of supervisor not only has the right, but frequently the mandate, to visit a classroom, observe, engage a teacher in examining his or her teaching, offer suggestions or advice, and so forth. The supervisor, as we have noted, has organizational sanction to gain access to the teacher's classroom and to talk with the teacher about instructional problems. In point of fact, many teachers union contracts specify the structure and timing of these contact fairly precisely. Physical and role access, then, tend to be organizational givens.

3. There is another type of access, though, that is not a given. It is a type of access over which the teacher, not the organization or supervisor, has complete control. It takes the form of the teacher permitting the supervisor to have access to her or his teacherhood, as it were. The issue is a simple one on the face of it, but quite complex, of course, when subjected to thoughtful analysis. It has its analog in the classroom. Pupils have control over what and how much they learn. It is they who permit learning to take place. Teachers, if they are to be successful, must somehow gain access to that part of their pupils' being that encourages them to "open the door" to the teacher's efforts. We think that an opening-of-the-door phenomenon must occur in supervision if supervisors are to be successful in helping teachers learn about and improve their teaching.

4. Some substantial part of the reason that supervision as a structure and a process seems to have had less than a systematically beneficial effect on teachers and teaching can ultimately be accounted for as supervisors, perhaps because of lack of understanding, concern or skill, have failed to behave in ways that encourage a teacher to permit the type of access to his or her teacherhood noted in (3).

This set of assumptions led to the problem with which this study is concerned. It was to test out whether the concept of access to teachers by supervisors was a viable one to consider with regard to problems of supervision in the schools. Two questions guided the study:

1. Would teachers be able to relate to the concept of access and also be able to describe behaviors on the part of their supervisor that encouraged them to permit access to self?

2. If teachers were able to describe supervisor behaviors that encouraged them to permit such access, would they be able to differentiate them from a set of behaviors that they simply might associate with a productive supervisory relationship.

Method

This study employed an initial qualitative interview approach with a subsequent quantitative one that involved the development and administration of a questionnaire. Because the interviews and questionnaire development and administration were concerned with two separate though related questions, each will be treated as a mini-study standing on its own.

The Interviews

Twelve teachers were interviewed. The interviews were tape-recorded. The teachers were asked to recall, in as much detail as possible, a set of circumstances in which they felt the supervision they had received had been highly productive for them. "Productive" was defined as an outcome that they thought was both professionally effective and personally satisfying.

After having described the situation, the interviewees were encouraged to think about it in terms of the concept of access. The general question was, "What were the circumstances that existed, or did the supervisor do anything that said to you, in effect, 'It's okay to open the door'?"

The response of the interviewees, as they reflected on the question was, first, that it made sense. Further, they had vivid recollections concerning things their supervisor had done that had led them to an experience of "opening-the-door." These recollections took the form of 41 responses from the 12 interviewees. The responses were content-analyzed and sorted into 11 categories of supervisory behavior that might encourage a teacher to permit access. These were:

1. Giving me immediate, non-punitive feedback about my teaching;
2. Making me feel that he/she is always available to me;
3. Making me feel I am intelligent;
4. Being open with me about what he or she knows or doesn't know;
5. Making me feel he or she is interested in me as a person;
6. Making my interests his or her interests;

7. Making me feel listened to;

8. Respecting me as an adult;

9. Having a collaborative, alternative-seeking approach to problem-solving;

10. Making me feel I am the expert; and,

11. Not being ritualistic about his or her relationship with me.

It seems clear, then, that the concept of access as it connotes the circumstance of a teacher "giving permission" to a supervisor to enter that teacher's personal world of work is a viable one. Further, it is not an ephemeral idea. The teachers interviewed seemed quite able to specify the things that a supervisor did or the conditions that he or she set in motion that created the feeling within the teacher that the granting of access would result in good things happening for the teacher.

There is a side note to these comments that bears strongly on their implications for productive supervision. It is that the teachers whose interviews produced the data were not simply the first 12 we encountered. That is, we requested interviews with a number of others but they were not held because the individual could not recall having had a productive supervisory relationship. On simply casual questioning it developed that conditions for granting access to their supervisor were absent. Further, what appeared to be the case was as much a function of what the supervisor didn't do as it was what he or she did do. Errors of omission seemed as important as those of commission. In most situations that were discussed, what appeared to happen was that the teacher felt treated as an object and not as a subject. The door remained closed.

The Questionnaire Study

Given that the concept of access was one that made sense to teachers and that it appeared to be associated with identifiable supervisor behaviors, the question arises as to whether or not these behaviors are seen in discreet terms; as separate, for example, from supervisor behaviors that might be associated in teachers' minds with characteristics of a productive supervisory relationship. For example, would any of the behavioral categories identified through the analysis of the interviews be seen as more "door opening" than others or would they simply cluster into one package of behavioral ingredients related to good supervision? Put another way, are these behavioral categories all cut of the same cloth or do teachers discriminate among them? Further, if they are thought of in relatively discreet ways, would there be differences in the way that findings might be related to sex, experience, or grade level of assignment of the teachers.

With these points in mind, a questionnaire was developed. It had two forms that differed only in the instructions given for responding. The first asked teachers to rank order three of the eleven categories presented which they thought would most likely lead to or typify a productive supervisory relationship as we had defined it. The second requested them to rank order the three categories of supervisor behavior which would most encourage them to allow their supervisor access to them as teachers -- to open the door, so to speak. The rank order direction was given in order to mandate, as best we could, a single first choice. Respondents were also asked to complete demographic questions

concerning their sex, years of teaching experience, and whether they taught in an elementary or secondary school.

The questionnaires were distributed non-randomly to teachers in New York State. The distribution took place at workshops sponsored by school districts, through the cooperation of teachers in schools and school districts, and through an informal network of colleagues from around New York State.

Each respondent completed only one form of the questionnaire. That is, they were not asked first to complete the "productivity" form and then the "access" one, or vice versa. This was done in order to preserve the independence of response criterion necessary for a Chi-square analysis to which the data were to be subjected.

One hundred and eighty-four usable responses were received which dealt with the characteristics and behaviors of a productive supervisory relationship and 192 usable responses were received regarding access or "door opening" behaviors. Returned questionnaires that did not clearly indicate a first choice in the rank ordering (e.g., two categories were ranked as first) and those that did not report demographic data were discarded.

Similar to the reason for having each respondent complete only one form of the questionnaire, use of the Chi-square statistic dictated that only the first choice rankings be analyzed as use of the second and third choices would violate the independency of response criterion that is required.

Results

With regard to the question of whether or not teachers might

discriminate between productivity and access behaviors of their supervisor, the analysis resulted in statistically significant findings (X^2 = 22.61, df = 10, $p<.05$). On a global level, teachers in the sample appeared to differentiate between supervisory behaviors that tend to "open-the-door" and those that were associated generally with the productivity of supervision. When specific categories were examined, it developed that in five of them, the observed result seemed to differ markedly from the expected. Two of these weighted in favor of access and three in favor of productivity. Relative to access, what appeared to be important were the supervisor behaviors of (2) "making me feel that he/she is always available to me" and (10) "making me feel that I was the expert." Categories having to do with productivity were (1) "giving me immediate, non-punitive feedback about my teaching," (7) "making me feel listened to," and (9) "having a collaborative, alternative-seeking approach to problem-solving."

No significant differences were found when the data were analyzed by demographic variables. Differences of sex, years of teaching, or whether or not one taught in an elementary or secondary school seemed not to influence the results obtained.

Discussion

In the discussion we ignore the issue of supervisory productivity because the questionnaire form that was productivity-oriented was simply used as a vehicle to get at the concept of access.

This study was an exploratory one. Its aim was to test the

assumption that the construct of access in supervisor-teacher relationships was a viable one. Some sense of its viability was gotten through the interviews that were conducted. In the questionnaire study, the intent was to get a firmer fix on the construct. That is, our assumption was that it would become more clear to the extent that teachers would discriminate between supervisor behaviors that they perceived to be more strongly associated with access than with productivity. The results bore out this assumption in that, for the total sample, of the five behaviors that seemed strongly to influence the significance of the Chi-square analysis, two of them were weighted in the direction of being more important to access than productivity. Specifically, the categories of supervisor availability and his or her being able to convey the idea that the teacher was "the expert" were oriented more toward access than productivity.

It is tempting, of course, to use results to prescribe what a supervisor should do to deal with the problem of being more or less of an uninvited guest of the teacher. This would be an error, although it does seem reasonable to suggest that the behavior of being available -- psychologically as well as physically, we should note -- is the ground upon which the notion of access rests.

An interesting speculation may also be made regarding the other category of "door opening" behavior that appeared to contribute to the statistical significance of the overall findings, "making me feel I am the expert." One of the reasons that teachers give for finding fault with their supervision is that they see supervisors as having left the scene of the

"action" and no longer having the expertise they may have had at one time (Blumberg, 1980). Yet they also perceive supervisors projecting the image of teaching expertise which they, the teachers, see them as no longer having. In order to overcome this problem, teachers may be saying, "as soon as you let me know that I have the expertise, I will be open to what you say is yours." This speculation, though, is just that -- a speculation.

Beyond these thoughts, though, to make prescriptions from these data is to fall into the same rational-technical trap in which the system is presently caught. Caution is indeed the better part of valor and so our position, based on the specific results of this study, is that supervisors need (1) to be conceptually aware of the idea that the circumstance we have called access may be directly related to the efficacy of their work with teachers, (2) to understand that the behaviors in which they engage in or don't engage in probably influence a teacher's willingness to grant access to self, and (3) that each relationship established with a teacher is idiosyncratic and requires its own thoughtful consideration.

The implications of our findings, though, go beyond the specifics. There seems to be abundant evidence (Blumberg, 1980; Mosher and Purpel, 1972) that the best intentions notwithstanding, the efficacy of the system of supervision in the schools is open to question. Our position is that this condition is less a function of the possibility that supervisors are not technically competent to help teachers, though this may be the case in some individual situations, than it is a function of the structure of supervisor-teacher role relations. For example,

some informal data collected by Reavis (Blumberg, 1980, 2-3) suggested that the reactions of teachers, when confronted with two different scenarios related to supervision -- one, that they were to be appointed a supervisor and the second that they were to be observed by their supervisor -- were quite different. In the first instance, the reactions were of the nature of looking forward to being able to help teachers. In the second, the reactions conveyed defensiveness -- "I'd give her what she wants," "I'd be very anxious...," and so forth. In a more formal study, Heishberger and Young (1975, p. 210) reported survey results of teacher attitudes toward supervision in which they commented that while 82 percent of the respondents felt that their supervision and evaluation were needed in the schools, about 70 percent felt that "the supervisor is often perceived as potentially dangerous."

Clearly, there seems to be a slip between the "cup" of the structure of school supervision and its interpersonal "lip." Something occurs and something doesn't occur which, it seems, has the effect of rendering the system as a system somewhat ineffectual. What occurs, we believe, is the development on the part of teachers of an attitude of defensiveness and protectiveness of self when they are confronted with the prospect of being observed, critiqued, or whatever. To use the jargon of this study, it appears that they have a tendency to "close the door" and not permit the supervisor access to themselves and their teacherhood. What results may well be a sort of charade in which both supervisor and teacher perform the ritual of supervision without engaging in its potential substance. But the

system's demands for "supervision" are met.

What does not occur, it seems likely, is a concern on the part of supervisors for the problem of gaining access into a teacher's world of work. It is not the case, of course, that they are unconcerned about helping teachers. Rather, it seems more likely that when teachers become supervisors, they take on the attitude set that goes along with that role (Lieberman, 1956). This set becomes part of their organizational "baggage" and it includes the acceptance of and support for the rational-technical system in which they work, despite their teacher-born memories that "they," now, are "dangerous." Our thinking is that when an organizational superordinate accepts the legitimacy of a particular system, it becomes difficult for that person to conceive of others not doing likewise. Thus, in the present case, if a supervisor sees the system as structured the way it should be, there is no reason why teachers should not see it in the same light. Or so the thinking may be. What's right is right. And given this perception, behaving in ways that will encourage a teacher to permit access may well assume low priority, certainly in a systematic sense, if the idea intrudes on the supervisor's consciousness at all.

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